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Female Desire, Pop Rock, and the Tiananmen Generation: The Synergy of Sexual and Political Revolutions in the Banned Chinese-German Film *Summer Palace* (2006)

ABSTRACT

The year 1989 comprises a vital part of the Tiananmen generation's memory and identity. Yet any attempt to address the turbulent events of that year, however obliquely, carries a high risk of censorship. Lou Ye took that risk in *Summer Palace* (2006). His iconoclastic exploration of sex and politics at a thinly disguised Beijing University was banned in China and languishes in relative obscurity in the West. This article endeavors to ensure that *Summer Palace* receives the serious recognition it deserves. The film's narrative arc stretches from Beijing to Berlin and uses a delayed death in Berlin as an opportunity to commemorate the dead of 1989.

Yiheyuan (*Summer Palace*, Lou Ye, 2006), a Chinese-French co-production set primarily in Beijing and Berlin, is a film that broke two taboos at once,

Qinna Shen, "Female Desire, Pop Rock, and the Tiananmen Generation: The Synergy of Sexual and Political Revolutions in the Banned Chinese-German Film *Summer Palace* (2006)," *JCMS* 60, no. 5 (2020–2021): 48–74.

either of which could have incurred a ban on public release in China.¹ It was the first Chinese film to include a brief scene with full-frontal nudity for both the female and male leads. The bold and explicit sex scenes led one American reviewer to comment, “In truth, I’ve never seen so much lovemaking in an aboveground film.”² Compounding this offense, *Summer Palace* was also the first—and so far the only—Chinese feature film to dramatize the 1989 student-led prodemocracy movement at Tiananmen Square, also known as the June Fourth Movement because of the military suppression that began early in the morning that day and led to the deaths of hundreds if not thousands of protesters.³ Shortly after *Summer Palace* premiered at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival, the film’s director, Lou Ye, and producer, Nai An, were banned from filmmaking for five years. Chinese authorities justified the ban by claiming that the film’s technical quality is substandard, citing some underlit dorm room scenes and blurred images that in fact exemplify the experimental, noirish effect that Lou and cinematographer Hua Qing intended to achieve. Aesthetic reasons were simply the excuse censors used to block the film. The unstated reason for the ban lay in the political daring of the film.

Lou Ye studied film directing at the Beijing Film Academy from 1985 to 1989. He participated in the protest movement, as did the majority of students in Beijing. Reflecting on the genesis of *Summer Palace*, he said, “Ever since I finished college in 1989, I’d been thinking about writing a love story. I also had an image of the Summer Palace in Beijing in my mind. The Summer Palace is right next to the university. The starting point for the screenplay was Beijing University, the Summer Palace, and a girl named Yu Hong.”⁴ His initial vision of the film excluded any reference to the June Fourth Movement, but once the idea of a love story taking place against the background of the student movement occurred to him, he had to make a choice: “What could the decision be? Go around it? We tried. Avoid it? We also tried. In the end, we decided not to circumvent or skip it.”⁵ Lou’s mentor, the liberal intellectual Cui Weiping, agreed with his decision: “June Fourth is an open secret. But if we keep this open secret for too long and not talk about it, as if it does not exist, this would be a big lie, and would damage our credibility in the future.”⁶

1 Lou Ye, dir., *Yiheyuan (Summer Palace)*, Laurel Films, Dream Factory, Rosem Films, and Fantasy Pictures, with Hao Lei, Guo Xiaodong, Hu Lingling, Zhang Xianmin, screenplay Lou Ye, Mei Feng, and Ma Yingli, director of photography Hua Qing, 2006.

2 David Denby, “Moral Landscapes: ‘Still Life,’ ‘Summer Palace,’ and ‘Cassandra’s Dream,’” *New Yorker*, January 21, 2008, 86.

3 Whereas the actual number of civilian casualties is still unknown due to government censorship, Timothy Brook concluded on the basis of hospital statistics that the Red Cross figure of twenty-six hundred was the best estimate of the number of people killed, and that at least twice as many were wounded. See Timothy Brook, *Quelling the People: The Military Suppression of the Beijing Democracy Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 161–162 and 169.

4 Emanuel Levy, “Summer Palace with Director Lou Ye,” *Emanuel Levy: Cinema 24/7* (blog), January 28, 2008, <http://emanuellevy.com/interviews/summer-palace-with-director-lou-ye-9/>.

5 Cui Weiping, “Lou Ye,” interviews conducted on August 27 and 29, 2006, in *Zhong-guo du li dian ying fang tan lu (On the Edge: Chinese Independent Cinema)*, ed. Ouyang Jianghe (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2007), 120.

6 Cui, “Lou Ye,” 131.

Lou Ye is one of Chinese cinema's key Sixth Generation directors, dubbed the Urban Generation by Chinese film scholar Zhang Zhen. Many Fifth Generation directors spent their formative years in the countryside due to the Cultural Revolution, and therefore rural China features prominently in their films. Most Sixth Generation directors grew up in an urban environment, however. As Zhang notes, "If stasis and contemplation constitute the keynote in the Fifth Generation's canon, the experimental cinema of the Urban Generation is marked by motion and a heightened awareness of the ephemeral temporality of contemporary urban life."⁷ Lou's first three features, *Zhōu mò qīng rén* (*Weekend Lover*, 1995), *Wèi qīng shào nǚ* (*Don't Be Young*, 1994), and *Suzhou hé* (*Suzhou River*, 2000) are, like *Summer Palace*, urban tales marked by mobility and an acute sense of contemporaneity. Writing about *Suzhou River* in *Hitchcock with a Chinese Face*, Jerome Silbergeld observes, "The turn here is . . . away from the Fifth Generation's mnemonic fixation on Communist China's past tragedies and toward a focus on the vagaries of the urban present, capturing the compromised realities of daily life as if experienced through some natural or documentary encounter rather than by artificial design."⁸ Nevertheless, there is naturally some continuity between the two generations of filmmakers: Lou's *Summer Palace* addresses the urban present, but it also marks an attempt to engage with a more recent tragedy.

Scholarship on Lou's films is disproportionately focused on the earlier *Suzhou River*, which was also banned (because Lou did not follow the bureaucratic procedure of first getting official permission before taking it to a festival abroad). Lou was prohibited from making films for three years, but the ban was lifted a year and a half later after Lou paid China's film bureau a \$2,500 fine in order to make his next film, *Zi hu die* (*Purple Butterfly*, 2003).⁹ Less convoluted than *Suzhou River* and *Purple Butterfly*, *Summer Palace* has the strongest political thrust of the five films that Lou had made by that point in his career, and it captures the spirit of the age defined by the Tiananmen Square Incident. What little scholarship the film has generated primarily uses Sigmund Freud's theories on mourning and melancholia to read the main protagonists and their relationships while only lightly touching on the political content.¹⁰

This article is less interested in psychoanalyzing the characters than in the rich and complex texture of this masterpiece. It does so by undertaking a close reading of *Summer Palace*'s plot in conjunction with its musical

7 Zhang Zhen, "Urban Dreamscape, Phantom Sisters, and the Identity of an Emergent Art Cinema," in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Zhang Zhen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 344–388, here 379.

8 Jerome Silbergeld, *Hitchcock with a Chinese Face: Cinematic Doubles, Oedipal Triangles, and China's Moral Voice* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 21.

9 Shao-yi Sun, "All Artists Are Narcissistic: An Interview with Lou Ye," in *One Hundred Years of Chinese Cinema: A Generational Dialogue*, ed. Haili Kong and John A. Lent (Norwalk, CT: Eastbridge, 2006), 244; and Jonathan Landreth, "Behind the Red Curtain: Helmer Risks Much for His Craft," *Hollywood Reporter*, Vol. 395 (July 18–24, 2006): 14.

10 Xiaoping Wang, *Ideology and Utopia in China's New Wave Cinema: Globalization and Its Chinese Discontents* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); and Yiju Huang, "By Way of Melancholia: Remembrance of Tiananmen Square Incident in *Summer Palace*," *Asian Cinema* 21, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2010): 165–178.

soundtrack and its many intertextual references, whose hidden meanings elude casual viewers. It contextualizes the film and argues that it is a testimonial to the lived experience of a generation later known as the 1989 or Tiananmen generation. *Summer Palace* masterfully converges sexual awakening and romantic confusion with political radicalization and frustrated aspirations. The film foregrounds the sexual revolution among college students, which in turn serves as a proxy for the political revolution. In addition to its bold exploration of sexual and political themes, the film rightly depicts the importance of popular music and rock songs for that generation and for the democracy movement. *Summer Palace* is also a quasi-feminist film in that it features the female protagonists' sexual desire and drive, which is untypical of Chinese screen heroines.

I use Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "direct time-image" to analyze two important sequences involving Yu Hong that take place at an empty swimming pool. Lou resisted a straitjacketed application of Western film theories to his film and summed up the visual style of *Summer Palace* as "liusi meixue" (June Fourth aesthetics).¹¹ Deleuze's theory, however, can help illuminate some aspects of Lou's work. The two sequences at the swimming pool serve as quintessential examples of Deleuze's direct time-image. In the first half of the film, Lou uses Yu's memory to reconstruct the national past; her bleak experiences after leaving Beijing, together with her friends' parallel drifting in Berlin, mirror the Chinese national identity post-Tiananmen. This article explores the choice of Berlin as the film's subsequent setting and the significance of the Beijing-Berlin axis. Following a detailed summary of the plot of *Summer Palace*, with special attention to its intertextuality, I will revisit the important theme of female desire and the Hitchcockian motif of the "female double" in the film. Last but not least, this article will address the film's reception and censorship.

As the only feature film that has thematized Tiananmen, *Summer Palace* could have served as a quasi-manifesto for this generation of directors. However, its ban drastically curtailed the film's ability to induce a public discourse around the suppressed student movement and how it shaped personal and national identity in China. The ban consigned the film to near oblivion and undermined cinema's potential for tackling larger issues surrounding the change in national identity caused by the Tiananmen events. In *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity*, David Martin-Jones illustrates how Deleuze's theories of time-image can broaden our understanding of the way national identity is constructed in cinema.¹² *Summer Palace*'s direct time-image of personal and collective trauma is crucial for understanding the new national identity China assumed thereafter.

SEX, POLITICS, AND THE TIANANMEN GENERATION.

Summer Palace reflects the experience of the Tiananmen generation, to which the filmmakers themselves belong. According to Nai An, "Most of us lived

11 Cui, "Lou Ye," 108–111.

12 David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity: Narrative Time in National Contexts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

through that era. A lot of the situations in this movie were events we had personally experienced. So we are interested and emotionally engaged and have a certain responsibility to portray what happened in those days.”¹³ The film does not, however, restrict its portrayal of the 1989 generation merely to their participation in student protests and the trauma caused by the Tian-anmen crackdown but gives a fuller, more realistic, and also provocative image by including authentic representations of campus and dorm life and of the romantic and sexual relationships of average students. In fact, the film foregrounds the love life and sexual relationships of college students, a hushed-up dimension of social development in the 1980s whose correlation with the student movement is rarely emphasized.

The narrative core of *Summer Palace* is the love story between Yu Hong and Zhou Wei, students at Beiqing University, a fictive conglomerate of Beijing University and Qinghua University. When the film begins, in 1987, Yu is working in her father’s shop in the border town of Tumen in North-east China. Lou explained his choice of a northern town: “We originally wanted to start the story in the north and progress along a north-south axis, a parallel of overall development in China.”¹⁴ Yu’s boyfriend Xiaojun, the local mailman, brings her the letter acknowledging her admission to Beiqing University, which spells the end of their relationship. The following scenes in Tumen introduce the themes of sex and violence that will be fully developed in Beijing. Before Yu departs, Xiaojun meets Yu for a final date. He parks his motorbike near a group of youngsters who are playing basketball.¹⁵ One of them pushes Yu out of the way, and Xiaojun fights back to avenge her but ends up receiving a beating. This scene is followed by Yu’s and perhaps also Xiaojun’s first sexual experience. The sex scene is devoid of elation or orgasm. Yu seems rather confused and sad, consciously or unconsciously performing what she later expresses in words: sex is the most direct way for her to show men her goodness.

The beginning of the film captures the rapid political, economic, and cultural liberalization that China underwent in the 1980s. The modern outside world has reached even this distant border town. Xiaojun rides a motorcycle and listens to a Sony Walkman; he offers Yu a cigarette and emphasizes that it is an imported brand; he plays a record of Ha Dong Jin, a South Korean performer, singing “In yeon” (Fate), a beautiful pop song about love, heartbreak, and departure. Like all of the songs on the soundtrack, this one is not only thematically but also contextually appropriate; in the border town of Tumen, ethnic Koreans comprise over half of the population. The sequence also illustrates the era’s new youth culture; young Chinese drink, smoke, have sex, and listen to modern, popular, romantic music, often of foreign provenance.

The transition from border town to capital city is carefully staged. When Yu is on the train to Beijing, happy and full of aspiration, the soundtrack plays

13 “Making of the Film,” directed by Anais Mertene, *Summer Palace*, directed by Lou Ye (New York: Palm Pictures, 2006), DVD.

14 Levy, “Summer Palace.”

15 It is to be noted that Lou likes to include motorbikes in his films (see Cui, “Lou Ye,” 112). In *Suzhou He*, Ma Da is a courier riding a motorbike.

a non-diegetic song about the transience of youth, “Qing Chun Wu Qu” (The Dance of Youth) by Luo Dayou. A montage nostalgically evoking the bustle of campus life shows with rapid cuts a library, a gender-segregated dormitory, lecture halls, and sports fields. This sequence, accompanied by multiple layers of sound, is characteristic of the film. A group of female students sings the popular romantic song “Yueliang daibiao wo de xin” (The Moon Represents My Heart) by Teresa Teng, a diva from that era; students play various musical instruments or line up for tickets to visit a French Impressionist art exhibition; some Western students conspicuously mingle and socialize with local students. The use of a quick succession of images to capture the vibrant atmosphere of 1980s Beijing parallels the film’s “cluttered soundscapes.”¹⁶ Then the camera cuts to Yu’s claustrophobic dorm room and a shot of feet, which belong to Yu’s roommate Zhu Wei and her boyfriend, dangling from an upper bunk bed. Song Ping, in the lower bunk, angrily asks the couple to leave so that she can sleep. As they walk out, Song mutters, “Disgusting!” Lou Ye has indicated that Song Ping is emblematic “of the generation of the Cultural Revolution.”¹⁷ Thus, she acts as a defender of conventional sexual morals. Her conflict with her roommate reveals the change in campus climate by the late 1980s: college is not only a time and place to study but to fall in love.

The members of the love triangle that forms the primary subject of *Summer Palace* come together swiftly. Yu is smoking in the hallway outside her crowded room when a roommate, Li Ti, uses the rumors circulating about Yu as an opportunity to get acquainted: “You know they’re all talking about you. They say either you’re heartbroken, or you’re lonely, or lesbian.” Li herself has a boyfriend, Ruo Gu, who is in East Berlin studying on a government scholarship; this detail establishes the Beijing-Berlin axis early in the film. Visiting Li back in China, Ruo brings the male protagonist, Zhou Wei, also a student at Beijing University, onto the scene. When the friends visit a bar, Ruo encourages Zhou to dance with Yu, and the remainder of the film traces the relationships among the four students.

Two crucial and somewhat enigmatic scenes take place at an empty swimming pool on campus. Deleuze’s time-image theory will help shed light on these two sequences. The first sequence takes place after Yu falls in love with Zhou. Yu sits alone at the edge of the pool, writing in her diary. Through her voice-over, viewers learn that Yu desires to live more and more intensely and is determined not to be mediocre in love. She admits that there are times when she is imposing her will on Zhou and that she does not want to hide her desires and constrain her actions. This confession reveals her sexual desire and establishes a strong feminist dimension of the film’s narrative. While she bares these inner thoughts, viewers see her memory images of herself and Zhou walking by the Kunming Lake at the Summer Palace —the first time the film’s title is invoked (see Figure 1).

As an example of the Deleuzian time-image, this sequence cuts between the present of Yu sitting at the pool, reminiscing, and the past when she

16 John Berra, “Lou Ye,” in *Directory of World Cinema: China 2*, ed. Gary Bettinson (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2015), 79.

17 Levy, “Summer Palace.”



Figure 1. While at the swimming pool, Yu recalls walking with Zhou on the grounds of the Summer Palace (Laurel Films, 2006).

and Zhou stroll at the Summer Palace. According to Martin-Jones, “Deleuze argues that time divides the subject in two, just as time itself is perpetually splitting into a passing present and a preserved past. There is, then, always an aspect of the subject in both past and present, an actual I in the present, and a virtual I in the past.”¹⁸ This precisely describes the state of reverie Yu finds herself in. Her daydreaming, or “woolgathering,” is literally and visually represented in the film by wooly stuff floating over from the nearby trees. Yu’s overwhelming memory forces her to lie down on the pavement. Citing other directors whose films illustrate the Deleuzian time-image, Martin-Jones writes, “In the films of directors such as Chris Marker, Alain Resnais and Federico Fellini, protagonists are often caught in moments of reverie. Physically stilled because of an inability to act, they directly experience the passing of time. Suspended in the interval between perception and action, the seer of the time-image travels within time, perhaps on a trip through memories.”¹⁹ Like that of the protagonists described by Martin-Jones, Yu’s sensory-motor link is broken, or at least suspended: she is not able to influence her own situation because she feels overwhelmed by her romance with Zhou and, later, by the tumult of the student movement.

After her first sexual encounter with Zhou, Yu’s narration continues as a professor is seen and heard lecturing on *Lanting Xu* (*Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion*) by the famous calligrapher Wang Xizhi from the East Jin Dynasty (317–420). The intertextual reference conveyed during the brief lecture scene is another example of how director Lou interweaves literary and musical allusions that resonate with the narrative. Similar to the song about fleeting youth that is heard as Yu travels to Beijing, Wang Xizhi’s

¹⁸ Martin-Jones, *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity*, 60.

¹⁹ Martin-Jones, 22.

preface serves as a *memento mori* and a reminder of the transience of life. The juxtaposition of pleasure and melancholy is immediately repeated; after the lovers are shown boating on Kunming Lake at the Summer Palace, engaging in a playful snowball fight, and bicycling past Kunming Lake and Tiananmen Square, students in a classroom are heard reciting a famous poem from China's earliest poetry collection, *Shi Jing* (*Book of Songs*). "Jian jia" (The Reeds) describes the sadness and depression brought on by unfulfilled love, when the lover is in sight but unattainable.

The film's foreboding allusions to *Preface to the Poems* and "The Reeds" are soon realized. In the next scene, Yu goes to Zhou's dorm room and discovers that he is eating noodles with another girl. Subsequently, their relationship turns stormy with betrayals, breakups, reconciliations, and breakups again. Lou indicated that he was wary of portraying Yu as a pure girl; instead, she is passionate, compulsive, and restless, a woman whose soul and body are one and the same. An emotional being, she is very straightforward with sex; she lives to love and be loved.²⁰

After Zhou beats up a male classmate who flirts with Yu, she barges into his dorm room and unabashedly sings the pop song "Woniude jia" (Snail House) by the Taiwanese singer Su Rui, a song about longing for a home and a place of warmth and rest. Zhou insists that she leave his dorm room. She dares him to hit her to make her leave. He slaps her twice before hugging her. The violent act of slapping in this volatile love relationship reveals director Lou's intended double entendre with this love story. In interviews, Lou compared the suppression of the student movement to the government slapping students on the cheek: "1989 was like a lovemaking experience between students and the government. It wasn't a good one. In fact, it was really bad, really uncomfortable. Then the government slapped the students on the cheek. The slap was too severe, and the students bled. The government knew it had gone too far. The government knew the slap was too harsh, so it spent the next ten years trying to redeem itself. If you look at the June 4th incident from this perspective, it's really no different from the relationship between two lovebirds."²¹ Lou makes it clear here that he uses love as a metaphor, as "cutting to the chase by just depicting love."²² Love is a stand-in for the political movement in 1989 and a signifier for understanding the government's crackdown and subsequent focus on developing the economy.

The reconciliation between the two lovebirds is temporary, however. Zhou breaks up with Yu again. Heartbroken, Yu is seen walking near the edge on the rooftop of a building. Her friend Li Ti assumes Yu wants to commit suicide and rushes to stop her. (This scene anticipates a later scene in which Li herself falls off a high-rise in Berlin.) The two young women begin to spend time with each other; they are seen lying in bed together and chatting, wearing the same red Chinese jackets with a floral pattern. When they go out to a disco bar, they are likewise dressed in identical blue-and-white striped outfits. At the disco they dance to the Spanish song "Sólo por tu amor"

20 Cui, "Lou Ye," 101, 108.

21 Mertene, "Making of the Film"; see also Cui, "Lou Ye," 127.

22 Mertene, "Making of the Film."



Figure 2. Yu lies convulsing on the slope leading from the shallow end of the pool to the deep end in *Summer Palace* (Laurel Films, 2006).

(Only Through Your Love) by Manuel Franjo, and the sassy American song “Hey Mickey” by Toni Basil. These scenes suggest an ambivalent homoerotic dimension to their friendship.²³ We recall that at their first acquaintance, Li Ti relays to Yu Hong the rumor that she is a lesbian. In the interview with Cui Weiping, director Lou said that Yu Hong’s physical desire includes fantasies of masturbation and homosexuality.²⁴ Chris Berry insightfully reads the two girls as “female doubles”—a Hitchcockian device, previously employed by Lou in *Suzhou River*, that will be discussed later.²⁵

The second swimming pool scene occurs at the beginning of the student protest. Yu spends an entire day at the drained pool, where she cannot sit still or remain calm; she cannot focus on her diary and is soaked in cold sweat. Lying in the pool, she convulses on the ramp that connects the shallow and the deep ends of the pool and loses consciousness (see Figure 2). In voice-over she reads diary passages where she writes to Zhou Wei about the crushing feelings she experienced and about losing consciousness at the pool again. The camera hovers over her writhing body as melancholic, elegiac music by the Iranian composer Peyman Yazdanian plays. Each of the two sequences at the swimming pool, in which viewers witness a paralyzed protagonist and time passing, exemplifies Deleuze’s direct time-image. As Martin-Jones puts it, “Rather than witnessing time through the medium of a character’s movement in space, we witness time’s movement around the

23 Wang, *Ideology and Utopia*, 56; and Michael Berry, “Beijing 1989,” in *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 343.

24 Cui, “Lou Ye,” 102.

25 Berry, “Beijing 1989,” 345; and Zhang, “Urban Dreamscape,” 347; and Silbergeld, *Hitchcock*, 11–46.

immobile character.”²⁶ During the second scene at the swimming pool, Yu’s voice-over does not name the reasons for her collapse, but her psychosomatic reactions, which coincide with the beginning of the student protest, allude to the convergence of personal and political trauma.

Summer Palace possesses a hybrid of movement-image and time-image; it displays at times a classical, unbroken, linear, movement-image structure based on the continuity editing rules typical of Hollywood, but it also experiments with discontinuous narrative time. Zhang explicitly spells out how Wang Quan’an’s and Lou Ye’s films exemplify the Deleuzian direct time-image:

Wang’s and Lou’s experimental films are part of an effort to create an alternative cinema with an avant-garde spirit. Their visual style, liberally blending art cinema and pop idioms (from MTV, karaoke, and computer games), is made up largely by a synergic use of noirish lighting (particularly emphasizing shadows and neon-lit night streets), jostling camera movement, jump-cuts, close-ups and extreme-close framing, long takes, direct address to the camera (and audience), discontinuous editing, shifting color schemes, and a contrapuntal and pastiche soundtrack. . . . Such a film form exemplifies what Deleuze sees as the “direct time-image” that seeks to restore time, and thought, to cinema.²⁷

One difference between Deleuze’s movement-image and time-image lies in the agency of individuals and the extent to which an individual has control over a situation or not.²⁸ The protagonists in *Summer Palace* are passionate and restless young people pulled into the student movement who become drifters after the Tiananmen crackdown. Their shifting personal identities could be read as an allegory of the post-socialist transformation in national identity. The Tiananmen Square Incident constituted the primary circumstance for forming a new national identity. It also assumed a definitive traumatic function for the Sixth Generation directors much as the Cultural Revolution did for the Fifth Generation directors.

Amid the emotional turmoil of the protagonists, the student movement starts on April 16, 1989, the day after former General Secretary Hu Yaobang died. When her classmates climb onto a flatbed truck to go to Tiananmen, Yu Hong watches them from her dorm room window.²⁹ In a split second, she runs down and climbs onto the truck, extremely excited. The film focuses on ordinary participants in the demonstration, not leaders. It does not portray them as uniformly prepared, well organized, or politically savvy, which they were not. Like Yu Hong, they are simple-minded, not terribly articulate about political affairs, but affected by the collective passion of the crowd.³⁰

26 Martin-Jones, *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity*, 23.

27 Zhang, “Urban Dreamscape,” 370.

28 Martin-Jones, *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity*, 22.

29 It is worth noting that Yu’s voice-over refers to Beijing University (Beida), not Beiqing, the fictive university name otherwise used in the film.

30 Cui, “Lou Ye,” 122–123.

In the following climactic sequence, the film abandons its earlier indirect and cautious approach to political themes. Now the Chinese text on the protest banners can be clearly read: “Carry on the Scientific Spirit of Patriotic Democracy,” “Punish Graft,” and “My Freedom Belongs to Heaven and Earth.” The film seamlessly transitions from a reenacted scene with students on the flatbed truck to historical footage that shows students on one of the flatbed trucks that volunteers drove to the Square. More historical footage shows seas of banners waving high, students from other provinces thronging to the capital by train, and over a million people demonstrating on Chang’an Street and the Square. These images alone would have justified the decision to censor the film.

While students shout the song “Yi wu suo you” (Nothing to My Name) by the first famous Chinese rock star, Cui Jian, the soundtrack plays “Yangqi” (Oxygen), sung by Hao Lei, the actress who plays the role of Yu Hong.³¹ Oxygen, necessary for life, could serve as a metaphor here for the freedom and democracy demanded by the protesters. One hour into the film, “Oxygen” becomes the soundtrack to the zenith of the democracy movement of 1989. Alternatively titled “Zuo’ai” (Making Love), the song is deployed at the climax of the student movement and reflects the filmmakers’ intent by showing the synergy of the sexual and political revolutions.

After participating in the protest at Tiananmen, Zhou, Yu, and Li walk back to the university late at night. Instead of discussing politics, they sing the Soviet folk song “Shan Zha shu” (Ural Rowan Tree), a very well-known tune in China. The choice of this Soviet song is interesting for two reasons. First, Mikhail Gorbachev’s visit in May 1989 officially normalized the Sino-Soviet relationship and ended the three-decade-long Sino-Soviet Split.³² Chinese students looked to Gorbachev as the model reformer of a Communist country. Singing the Russian folk song echoes the fact that the two countries re-solidified their friendship. Second, in this song, the heroine asks the rowan tree to help her decide which of two fine workers, a machinist or a blacksmith, she should choose. They both are brave and good looking; her anxious heart is at a loss. This love song about romantic confusion hints at the convoluted relationships between Zhou, Yu, and Li. In contrast to “Ural Rowan Tree,” in which a woman is torn between two men, in *Summer Palace*, two women love the same man.

The climactic sequence of the film starts with Zhou and Li’s love affair, which likely takes place during the evening of June 3, although the date is not clearly indicated in the film. As protesters chant outside the dorm building, inside, Li Ti waits for Zhou Wei in the hallway. The two quickly go into her room and start making love passionately. This constitutes, on the one hand, a betrayal of their mutual friend Yu Hong and, on the other hand, an instance of exercising sexual freedom in the midst of the student movement. While Zhou and Li are in bed, campus police storm into the room and interrupt their heated lovemaking. The lovers are humiliated and disciplined, and

31 Hao Lei sang it initially in a 2003 play, *Lianai de xiniu* (Rhinoceros in Love).

32 Mertene’s “Making of the Film” contains footage of Deng Xiaoping meeting Gorbachev that was deleted from the final cut of *Summer Palace*.

the affair becomes public knowledge; a male student makes sure to share the news with Yu Hong.

College sex as portrayed in the film was not a result of the June Fourth Movement. The sexual relationships among students were part of university life in Beijing before the Movement. The protests, however, created circumstances conducive for sexual activity. The chaotic and anarchic situations agitated students politically, emotionally, and physically but also libidinally. Since classes were boycotted by students or canceled by universities, students had more free time on their hands. The film shows students playing cards in their dorms, a sign of the abundant leisure time they enjoyed in the middle of the semester. In fact, the movement lasted for more than six weeks, from April 16 to June 4. The long duration of the protests drained the energy of many students, and indeed the movement sagged at times before the hunger strike reenergized it. The need for sexual release increased in proportion to leisure, boredom, and chaos.

A participant in the movement reminisced about clandestine sex among students in an anonymous essay titled “The June Fourth Sexual Liberation Movement.” In this bold and straightforward confession, the demonstrator shared the fact that in the evenings some students left the Square to spend the night in nearby places; they gradually overcame moral inhibitions and started engaging in sexual orgies. The demonstrator went on to state, “In my memory, what happened that year in Beijing, at Tiananmen Square, and on campus was the first sexual liberation movement in New China.”³³ The effects of this revolution are vividly illustrated in *Summer Palace*. Besides the example of Zhou and Li, Yu Hong teaches her roommate Dongdong how to masturbate, and the two sleep with boys from another university while the student movement is going on.

The sexual dimension of the student movement is a recurring topos in contemporary accounts. Lee Feigon observes the sexual appeal of student leaders: “In their revolutionary headquarters at Beijing Normal University, for instance, leaders such as Wuer Kaixi plastered their walls with pictures of pin-up girls. Wang Dan, the ‘intellectual’ of the movement, openly bragged to an American reporter about the love letters he had received from enamored Chinese women.”³⁴ In his autobiography, *Almost a Revolution*, Shen Tong, one of the student leaders, describes his first sexual experiences with his girlfriend while in college. He argues that political changes are preconditioned by personal and sexual liberation: “Since we lived in a restrictive society, I naturally felt that having sex was somehow an anti-government activity. I already believed that before we could change society, we had to change ourselves, and for me, sex was part of that.”³⁵ Political meaning had been infused into students’ sexual activities, precisely because authorities regulated these private affairs, as illustrated by the raid during Li and Zhou’s lovemaking.

33 “Liusi zhi xing jiefang yundong” (The Sexual Liberation Movement during June Fourth), *DWNNews.com* (blog), June 5, 2014, <http://blog.dwnnews.com/post-445409.html>.

34 Lee Feigon, *China Rising: The Meaning of Tiananmen* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1990), 218.

35 Shen Tong, *Almost a Revolution* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 111–112.

Having sex during college constituted a rebellious or deviant act, depending on one's viewpoint.

One of the most famous romantic events associated with the movement took place right on the Square on May 21, the day after martial law was announced, when student leader Li Lu from Nanjing University married his girlfriend. Li declared, "In my life I've experienced everything but sex and marriage. I may die at any time. I owe myself this pleasure."³⁶ One of the scriptwriters of *Summer Palace*, Mei Feng, who entered the same university as Lou in 1986, said that people were affected by the atmosphere on Tiananmen Square, which was like a fireball lit by love; it was as if two people who loved each other feverishly had suddenly discovered that the world they lived in was also in a state of fever. He recalled that there were many weddings on the Square during the student movement and many chance lovers on the Square, as though this was all very natural in that era.³⁷ Lou has also observed that suddenly all kinds of possibilities were opened up for the protesters; freedom and love, freedom and sexual liberation, all this belonged to the zeitgeist of the late 1980s.³⁸ In retrospect, the nighttime sexual activity of these protesting students is not surprising. This aspect of the student movement, however, has not received much attention because of the private and sensitive nature of these matters. Yet apparently, in addition to demanding political freedom, many students were also claiming their sexual liberty. Whereas political rights were harder to obtain, sexual freedom was easier to practice and more difficult to police.

Wu'erkaixi, who continued to criticize the Chinese government from abroad after escaping via Hong Kong, points out that the 1989 student movement was also a cultural rebellion and anti-authoritarian struggle for individuality and subjectivity.³⁹ Robin Munro, a researcher on China for Asia Watch, observed that a Freudian sense of libido was an important part of the Chinese democracy movement; he compared the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s to the student movement of the late 1980s and saw "a political economy of libido moving from a primitive to an advanced, more mature stage."⁴⁰ During the protest movement, students may have been further emboldened to cast aside moral conventions as a spirit of political rebellion spilled over into the private, sexual sphere. Thus, the sexual liberation movement arrived belatedly but surely in China, about twenty years after the wave of protests that spread through the United States and many European countries.

Fang Li, a coproducer of *Summer Palace* at Beijing-based Laurel Films, considers both the sexual and political demands as two distinct markers of the 1980s and notes how sex in *Summer Palace* becomes symbolic of social change.⁴¹ According to Lou, the film "is about love, about passion. Passion

36 Berry, "Beijing 1989," 307.

37 Cui, "Lou Ye," 125.

38 Cui, 108.

39 Wu'erkaixi, transcript, in "Chinese Writers under Fire: The Struggle for Human Rights in China," *PEN American Center Newsletter*, no. 70 (December 1989): 19; see also Richard Bernstein, "To Be Young and in China: A Colloquy," *New York Times*, October 7, 1989.

40 Robin Munro, transcript, in "Chinese Writers," 20–21; and Bernstein, "To Be Young."

41 Mertene, "Making of the Film."

in love and passion in politics are the same thing. That was an impulsive, passionate time.” Lou used love and sex as proxies to express his political stance: “This is not a political film. I just thought the chaos of that time resembled the chaos possible in a love relationship. I belonged to that young generation. We longed for democracy and sexual liberation.”⁴² That *Summer Palace* is not a political film was obviously a disingenuous statement. Although political sentiments were not the first impulse for making the film, *Summer Palace* turned out to be a rare, heretical artwork coming out of China that commemorates the student movement and promotes the ideals of democracy and freedom.

POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION, POP ROCK, AND TIANANMEN.

Despite the conscious effort the filmmakers made to offset the explicitly political content of *Summer Palace* by foregrounding sexual relationships, the mere fact of its acknowledgment of the June Fourth Movement flouted the utter silence on this topic enforced in the public sphere in China. In fact, as demonstrated below, the politics of the film are expressed both implicitly and explicitly.

Early in the film, the popular song “The Dance of Youth” by Luo Dayou is played in its entirety. The third stanza of the song pays homage to the revolutionaries buried under the Yellow Flower Mound, those who gave their lives fighting for political freedom and democracy during the failed Guangzhou Uprising in 1910. A replica of the Statue of Liberty stands on top of the Mausoleum of the Seventy-Two Martyrs. The song thus anticipates the central themes of the film: youth, of course, but also democracy.

The first bar scene in *Summer Palace* includes a cameo appearance by the scholar and activist Cui Weiping, who is seen engaging in a debate about the rights of peasants, workers, and intellectuals. Her appearance thus reflects the liberal culture that fostered political discussion in that era. In the 1980s, Cui was a professor, translator, and social critic at the Beijing Film Academy, where Lou and scriptwriter Mei studied. She was one of the most prominent liberal intellectuals of that era and remains a human rights activist who has been censored and watched closely by state security agents in China.⁴³ She openly stresses the dire need to break the collective silence on June Fourth.⁴⁴ She translated Ivan Klíma’s *Duch Prahy* (*The Spirit of Prague*, 1994) as well as works by Czech writer and politician Václav Havel and the Polish dissident and public intellectual Adam Michnik into Mandarin. Cui’s choice of works to translate indicates that she regards Eastern Europe’s political reforms as a model for China; ironically, her translations could only be published outside of China. After *Summer Palace* was banned in China, she joined others in petitioning the government and criticizing the ban.⁴⁵ In 2008, Cui was one of the

42 “Yihyuan luolu changjing dadan, zhenhan jiana faguo yingping ren” (Nudity Scene in *Summer Palace* So Bold That It Shocked French Reviewers at Cannes), May 20, 2006, <http://bbs.aboluowang.com/thread-153606-1-1.html>

43 “In China, A Ceaseless Quest to Silence Dissent,” *NPR*, October 30, 2012.

44 “Cui Weiping: Why Do We Need to Talk about June 4th?,” *China Digital Times*, May 18, 1999, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2009/05/cui-weiping-why-do-we-need-to-talk-about-june-4th/>.

45 “Guanyu jinzhi daoyan Lou Ye deng ren laodong de kanfa” (Opinions on Banning

first in China to sign the democracy manifesto “Ling ba xianzhang” (Charter 08), one of whose authors, Liu Xiaobo, was sentenced to eleven years of prison in 2009 and died there in 2017.⁴⁶ The very presence of Cui in the film is significant, and her later interview with Lou and Mei further illustrates the historical, narrative, aesthetic, and political aspects of the film.

In another sequence in *Summer Palace*, students attend a meeting that alludes to political gatherings on campuses at the time, such as the democracy salons that were organized in the days before the 1989 protest. A student who speaks at the meeting but is not shown on-screen shares her feelings after visiting someone in prison. A classmate who leaves the meeting comments that it is very noisy inside. Although Yu Hong attends the meeting, her attention is not on the speaker; she is distracted by an inquisitive male student who flirts with her, offers her a cigarette, and suggests that she test his manly skills by sleeping with him. The scene ends with Zhou beating up the student—another brawl among young men, who quickly resort to blows to express their feelings. Such outbursts of violence were tolerated by campus police, who would, however, act quickly if they caught students engaging in sexual behavior. Although the film remains deliberately vague about the nature of the meeting, its evocation of political meetings such as democracy salons is historically accurate. Democracy salons already existed in 1986 but were terminated after the suppression of that year’s student protest; blame for the protest fell on General Secretary Hu Yaobang, and he was removed from office. In the spring of 1989, Wang Dan, a history major at Beijing University, revived the democracy salons.⁴⁷ As Lee Feigon comments, “Much of the discussion was inane, but it fostered an atmosphere of dissent and daring.”⁴⁸ In this light, Lou’s portrayal of a noisy yet boring political gathering is not far from reality.

The film also bears witness to the erection of “democracy walls,” where students could post public messages, when a brawl, apparently triggered by a political poster, takes place in front of a bulletin board. The board evokes the famous sanjiao di (Triangle Corner) at Beijing University, which gave students an important venue for free speech and political initiatives before the age of social media. In spring 1989, the Triangle Corner played a central role in the formation and organization of the student movement.⁴⁹ The messages displayed on the bulletin board are not legible in the film, although one poster seems to say “No More Lies.” But in the deleted scenes included on the DVD release, one can clearly see Chinese political slogans taped to the dormitory walls, including “Patriotism Is Not a Crime,” “Long Live Democracy,” and “Long Live Freedom.” A female student is also heard repeating the words written on her headband: “Fight Corruption.”⁵⁰ The deleted scenes contain

Director Lou Ye and Others from Working), BBS, October 7, 2006, <https://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2006-10-09/12341276120.html>

46 Anne Henochowicz, “Person of the Week: Cui Weiping,” *China Digital Times*, April 13, 2017, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2017/04/person-week-cui-weiping/>.

47 Wang was later put at the top of the government’s most wanted list.

48 Feigon, *China Rising*, 113.

49 The area, once sacred to the democracy movement, was demolished by the government in 2017.

50 Translations of some slogans are included in the subtitles, but there are a few

many other explicitly political scenes that did not make it into the final film, partly due to length constraints and partly due to careful self-censorship.⁵¹

Importantly, *Summer Palace* also contains a single, barely audible reference to the hunger strike of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. It occurs when Yu exposes her roommate Song Ping as a book thief. Before Song is shown stealing books, she tells others, “I’ve decided that I’ll join the hunger strike immediately tomorrow,” an allusion to the tactic adopted by student protesters in the middle of May.⁵² Song is at once a book thief and a hunger striker. Thus, the film does not create a black-and-white binary narrative of the government versus the students, nor does it paint a rosy picture of the participants in the movement. What’s more, the film’s passing mention of the hunger strike exemplifies its rhetorical strategy of summoning up political issues through oblique or mumbled references. Aesthetically, this moment also showcases Lou’s directorial style of adopting cluttered soundscapes, where diegetic voices, voice-overs, and diegetic or non-diegetic music may all overlap.

While on the truck, Yu Hong starts to sing the popular rock song “Nothing to My Name” by Cui Jian, and other students chime in, shouting the song at the top of their lungs. Andrew Jones points out that Cui Jian’s song was adopted by students and workers as “a marching anthem.”⁵³ The song struck a chord among young people, as it is about a proletarian man with nothing to his name searching for love. Although he does not possess material things, he nonetheless claims the right to love; what he can offer the girl are his aspirations and freedom. More than the lyrics themselves, however, it was the self-expressive energy and rebelliousness of this new music that inspired a liberating feeling in students.

Music was a galvanizing force for the 1989 generation. The Western press referred to the student movement as the Chinese Woodstock due to the role that popular and rock music played in it.⁵⁴ In the 1980s, these new genres of music swept through China as consumer electronics became increasingly affordable. A star culture developed, and the business of mass entertainment thrived. Famous singers and their songs accompanied an entire generation’s growing up. Likewise, songs and music—ranging from the left-wing anthem “The Internationale” and revolutionary songs to pop rock—constituted a crucial part of the prodemocracy movement, both as a way for students to express themselves and also as a way to boost morale and demonstrate solidarity. Seven days into the hunger strike, on May 20,

mistakes. For example, “Dadao fubai” (Fight Corruption) is mistranslated as “Down with foreign tigers,” “Chengzhi guandao” (Punish Graft) is rendered as “Political change,” and “Aiguo wu zui” (Patriotism Is Not a Crime) is paraphrased as “Love your country.”

51 Mertene, “Making of the Film.”

52 This line is not reflected in the subtitles.

53 Andrew F. Jones, “The Politics of Popular Music in Post-Tiananmen China,” in *Popular Protest & Political Culture in Modern China: Learning from 1989*, ed. Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Elizabeth J. Perry (Boulder: Westview, 1994), 148.

54 Feigon, *China Rising*, 186, 206; and Bernstein, “To Be Young.” See also Liu Yiran, “Rocking Tiananmen,” in *New Ghosts, Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices*, ed. Gernie Barme and Linda Jaivin (New York: Random House, 1992), 5–22.

1989, Cui Jian came with his rock band to perform for the students.⁵⁵ Defying martial law, students entertained themselves with music, drinking, and smoking on the Square and created “a carnival-like atmosphere.”⁵⁶ On May 27, Hong Kong singers performed collectively at the Concert for Democracy in China, a benefit concert staged to show solidarity with Chinese students during the period of martial law.⁵⁷ Hou Dejian, a Taiwanese singer, was one of the “Four Gentlemen” who went on a hunger strike at Tiananmen Square shortly before the crackdown.

While in exile, Wu'er later told scholars that Chinese rock had been more important to student protesters than the ideas of reformist intellectuals: “The people who are most influential among young people are not Fang Lizhi and Wei Jingsheng, but poets such as Bei Dao and Gu Cheng, and singers such as Cui Jian and Qi Qin.”⁵⁸ As Andrew Jones observes, “The extent to which popular music became a vehicle for *popular protest* during the Tiananmen movement of 1989 . . . was unprecedented. Throughout the movement . . . popular music—and in particular the rock music (*yaogun yinyue*) that emerged in Beijing in the late 1980s as an ‘underground’ alternative to state-run popular music (*tongsu yinyue*)—served as a powerful means for the public expression of political and cultural dissent.”⁵⁹ The film narrative and Wu'er's remarks underline the social implications of rock 'n' roll music, as laid out in David E. James's *Rock 'N' Film*.⁶⁰ Especially in its early phase, rock 'n' roll was often associated with juvenile delinquency. *Summer Palace* presents the relationship between cinema and pop rock, visuality and musicality, as not a rivalry but a dialogue, with each one elaborating or commenting on the other. As my close reading of the music and song lyrics in *Summer Palace* demonstrates, the songs in the film, pop or rock, diegetic or non-diegetic, intertwine with the narrative and politics of the film. Even the non-diegetic music appears “semi-diegetic” because the lyrics seem to comment on the narrative.⁶¹

Given the constraints placed on Chinese filmmakers by the state, the most courageous moment in the film is the dramatization of the military suppression on the night of June 3–4, events that are captured in a sequence of long takes. That night brings all of the film's major characters back to the Beiqing campus. Ruo Gu, who has just returned from Germany, finds Li Ti, who appears devastated by private and public turmoil. At that moment, gunshots are suddenly heard, and the crowd starts to panic. In the chaos, Dongdong comes to Zhou to tell him that Yu Hong disappeared with Xiaojun, Yu's first boyfriend, who has just arrived from Tumen. Dongdong and

55 “Cui Jian 1989 Tiananmen guangchang xianchang xianchang” (Cui Jian Singing at Tiananmen Square in 1989), YouTube video, posted by Fanqiang bi kan (Must Read via VPN), June 14, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_5WlEnPAme/.

56 Feigon, *China Rising*, 136.

57 *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*, directed by Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon, documentary, distributed by NAATA/CrossCurrent Media (San Francisco, Calif.: 1996).

58 Wu'er, transcript, in “Chinese Writers,” 19; see also Bernstein, “To Be Young.”

59 Jones, “Politics of Popular Music,” 148.

60 David E. James, *Rock 'N' Film: Cinema's Dance with Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

61 David E. James, “Absolute Beginnings,” in *Rock 'N' Film*, 25.



Figure 3. Dongdong freezes amid military violence in *Summer Palace* (Laurel Films, 2006).

Zhou run outside only to witness people throwing rocks at a military truck that has been set ablaze. Then some soldiers walk over while firing into the air. For a moment, the camera freezes on Dongdong, who stands paralyzed as if awaiting an execution before being pulled away by Zhou. Another iteration of Deleuze's direct time-image unfolds here as viewers again witness time's movement around an immobile character (see Figure 3). This sequence explicitly portrays the military suppression of the demonstrators, albeit in a minimalistic way. It must have sent chills down the spines of the censors and sealed the film's fate. Although it offers only a peripheral glimpse of the fatal succession of events in Tiananmen Square, it may very well reflect what students at the various universities in Beijing would have witnessed in the vicinity of their campuses. (Most of the students camping out at Tiananmen Square at this point were from other provinces, because it was not always the case; Beijing students also camped at Tiananmen earlier.)

In the film, this tense and violent series of events is followed by a thunderstorm, a meteorological reminder that the Tiananmen bloodshed washed away all the demonstrators' hopes.⁶² Chen Jun, a roommate of Zhou Wei, comes into the dorm room drenched and distraught; he drinks a beer, then smashes the bottle, yells "Fucking bastards!" and collapses into Zhou's arms, crying. As Lou has said, "In those circumstances, all we could do was holler and break bottles, no more. We were powerless. I had an experience similar to that one."⁶³ In one of the DVD supplements, the actor who plays Chen Jun gives eyewitness testimony on the June Fourth massacre. His home was near Liubukou, where the army met strong resistance from Beijing residents and countless deaths occurred. He stood on the wreck-

62 Rainy scenes are a signature of Lou's films; see Cui, "Lou Ye," 112.

63 Levy, "Summer Palace."

age of a burned-out bus and waved rifles taken from soldiers.⁶⁴ Finally, the sequence dramatizing the June Fourth suppression ends with a scene showing students dressed in military uniforms boarding buses while the song “Don’t Break My Heart” by the Chinese rock band Black Panther plays in the background. This song dovetails with the film’s narrative because the lyrics recount the end of a relationship and the lovers’ memories of their many promises and passionate impulses.

The entire sequence related to the student movement lasts for twenty minutes, and some Western critics found fault with Lou’s elliptical treatment of the demonstrations and the crackdown. After viewing the film at Cannes, American reviewer J. Hoberman commented that “[o]ne waits in vain for the events at Tiananmen Square to erupt into the foreground.”⁶⁵ However, the unprecedented depiction of June Fourth by a mainland Chinese director was in itself a wonder. The script Lou Ye submitted to the film bureau for preapproval apparently did not specify the film’s exact visual rendition of the student movement and its military suppression. Any mention of June Fourth would have terminated the project early on, and Lou himself would have faced severe punishment as well. Failing to secure official approval, Lou made another strategic decision to bring *Summer Palace* in its unapproved form to Cannes so that it would reach the outside world without being eviscerated by censors. Only in this way could the film be preserved and shared as a public memory of the watershed event that determined personal and national identity in post-Tiananmen China.

After the Tiananmen sequence, as the song “Don’t Break My Heart” is playing, images of the main characters appear while on-screen text summarizes their movements after June Fourth. Ruo Gu leaves Beijing and goes back to Berlin. Yu Hong takes the train back to Tumen, looking melancholic and lost—not smiling and hopeful as she was when she rode the train to Beijing. Li Ti and Zhou Wei remain in Beijing, waiting for their German visas. Some reviewers complained that the film should end when the protest movement fails and the protagonists leave Beijing. They were impatient with the second half of the 140-minute film, which recounts the students’ post-Tiananmen and post-graduation years.⁶⁶ But Lou Ye was interested in the impact of June Fourth on the subsequent lives of these college students: “Now order appears to have returned to normal, but the internal turmoil was much harder and would take much longer to return to order and normalcy. The majority of the youth didn’t die that night. They had to find a way to continue living. I didn’t die that evening. I care about the people who are living.”⁶⁷ The Tiananmen crackdown had a lasting impact on the emigration of Chinese intellectuals, as represented by Zhou and Li. The United States, West Germany, and other countries initiated special visa programs to help Chinese nationals to go or remain abroad.

64 Mertene, “Making of the Film.”

65 Berra, “Lou Ye,” 81.

66 “*Summer Palace* Critic Reviews,” Metacritic, <http://www.metacritic.com/movie/summer-palace/>. See, for example, V. A. Musetto, “Epic Full of Love & Naked Truth,” *New York Post*, January 18, 2008.

67 Cui, “Lou Ye,” 132.

Economic migration within the country also became more frequent and is represented in *Summer Palace* by Yu Hong's cross-country movement.

FEMALE DESIRE AND THE BEIJING-BERLIN AXIS

After the Tiananmen sequence, Li Ti and Zhou Wei travel from Beijing to Berlin, but only Zhou will return to China. According to Lou Ye, what happened later in Berlin and in the Soviet bloc was another reason that the film could not end at Tiananmen: "It's a challenge for the film that the climax is in the middle part, not at the end, but the story could not end at the climax. The film treats Beijing, Berlin, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the liberalization of Eastern Europe, all part of a whole picture."⁶⁸ To make the transition to Berlin, the film weaves together historical footage of key moments: the opening of the Berlin Wall, Gorbachev's resignation in 1991 and his succession by Boris Yeltsin, Deng Xiaoping's visit to Shenzhen in 1992, and a contingent of five hundred People's Liberation Army soldiers entering Hong Kong in 1997 as the colony's last British governor, Chris Patten, departs. Lou's choice to continue the film in Berlin ingeniously connects two cities where Communist rule was openly challenged in 1989, incorporating the Chinese national narrative into a transnational narrative in an attempt to dramatize the Tiananmen generation's awareness of the Beijing-Berlin connection. In so doing, the film juxtaposes two historical hotspots of 1989 and implicitly contrasts failures and successes in each via the violent and peaceful outcomes of their respective prodemocracy movements. When asked why he transposed the story to Berlin, Lou answered, "Berlin is a lot like China, especially Beijing, in terms of the way society is organized. And Berlin is important to me personally, it's the city where I met my wife."⁶⁹ The Berlin segment of the film thus connects personal and collective memories of the city.

The mood of the second half of *Summer Palace* is distinctly subdued, melancholic, and pensive. In the aftermath of the military suppression, Yu Hong drops out of Beijing University and drifts aimlessly from Tumen to Shenzhen, Wuhan, and Chongqing. However, personal and political trauma collide in what Berry calls "dual betrayal" of Yu—namely, the personal betrayal by her lover and her friend and the political betrayal by the government on June Fourth.⁷⁰ Her sexual desire leads to many affairs, for which she pays a heavy price: low self-esteem, an abortion, and a heedless marriage. Once a promising student, Yu is now a college dropout, a rather wretched, self-abandoned, unambitious woman who works at a highway service area. Berry views Yu's "subsequent downward spiral of sex and nihilistic self-destruction" after the dual betrayal as "the post-traumatic replaying of the lingering fantasies and nightmares of 1989."⁷¹ Yu represents a lost generation whose dreams

68 "Dianying Yiheyuan she liusi neirong zao Beijing fengsha" (Movie *Summer Palace* Involves June Fourth and Was Banned by Beijing), *Huaxia Wenzhai*, May 19, 2006, <http://hx.cnd.org/2006/05/page/2/>

69 Lou's wife, Ma Yingli, graduated from the German Film and Television Academy in Berlin and was one of *Summer Palace*'s scriptwriters. Levy, "Summer Palace."

70 Berry, "Beijing 1989," 342.

71 Berry, 344.

were crushed and whose lives were devastated. Her fate mirrors the bleak post-college prospects of the Tiananmen generation, who were suspected of political unreliability.

Using montage and cross-cutting, the film shows Yu's and Zhou's parallel lives on different continents. Zhou and Li seem to blend in well in German society. Zhou finds temporary employment at a German company where he does not have to speak much German, and Li works as an artist. They have some friends, both Chinese and European. But beneath this tranquil surface, they share a feeling of alienation and drifting that is expressed when a Polish friend of Zhou's asks, "Where are we? Is it Berlin?" Li is living with her boyfriend Ruo yet is still in love with Zhou, who yearns for Yu Hong and is determined to return to China. He will not leave Berlin unscathed, however. A tenderly erotic scene in which Li cuts Zhou's hair on the balcony while the two are naked is soon followed by the most brutal moment in the film—aside from the June Fourth violence—when Li kills herself before Zhou's eyes.

Shortly before Li's death, she and her friends witness leftist demonstrations at the 2005 May Day rally in Berlin; this scene was shot in a documentary style as the actors observed a real-time march in the city. The only flag that the camera clearly captures shows portraits of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, and Mao Zedong. In the next scene, the friends go up to a rooftop to look at the city of Berlin. Sitting on the low wall at the edge of the roof, Li glances up as a cluster of startled pigeons flies off. Li then leans backward and looks meaningfully at Zhou before falling off of the roof. This scene may be an intertextual reference to the scenes of falling in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and Lou's own *Suzhou River*. Li's suicide comes as a shock to her friends and viewers. Lou explained in an interview that her suicide was motivated by her despair over love.⁷²

Female desire in *Summer Palace* is thus not restricted to Yu Hong but is experienced also by Li Ti as well as Dongdong and Zhu Wei (whose name is similar to Zhou Wei's). Yu's voice-over explains that she discusses desire most with Zhu Wei, who is the sexiest among her group of friends and always gets the cutest boys. Yu also taught Dongdong how to masturbate, becoming the catalyst for the latter's sexual awakening. Nevertheless, the film's portrayal of Li Ti's love for Zhou Wei is its most important example of female desire. However, Zhou Wei and Yu Hong continue to love each other despite the physical distance between them and their affairs with other people. What Ruo Gu tells Zhou Wei about Li Ti on the way to the airport in Berlin is important for understanding Li's death: Li once told Ruo that she did not want him to love her, because love is like a wound in the heart, and when the wound heals, love disappears. By recounting this moment to Zhou, Ruo implies that Li wanted to preserve an open and unhealed wound Zhou left in her heart; she chose death in order to keep her love for him alive.

In this light, Yu Hong and Li Ti are female doubles also because they have similar attitudes toward love. Ultimately, Yu and Zhou separate after a brief reunion because, in Li Ti's terms, they, too, prefer to keep the wound from healing so that their love will be preserved, as painful as it is. Back in

72 Cui, "Lou Ye," 107.



Figure 4. Yu Hong poses for Wu Gang to take her picture over the Yangtze River in *Summer Palace* (Laurel Films, 2006).

1989, in Beijing, Yu paradoxically had suggested that she and Zhou should break up because she feared that she could not leave him. Almost masochistically she desires the wound of separation precisely because she feels that they are inseparable. Although she has sex with a married man as well as with her coworker Wu Gang, she has only Zhou in her heart. Zhou has passion, as represented by the fire of the cigarette lighter he wields in the rooftop scene in Berlin as well as on Alexanderplatz, whereas Wu Gang's cigarette lighter does not work. Wu is also marked by his low social status as a mere mailroom worker, similar to Yu's first boyfriend, Xiaojun the mailman. When Yu and Wu behave like tourists in Wuhan, taking photographs at local landmarks, Wu's camera runs out of film, underlining his lack of material resources. One of his snapshots, however, contains a clue to Yu's character: Standing high above the Yangtze River and the Yangtze Bridge, Yu Hong makes sure that the bridge far below is captured in the photo, indicating her desire for depth, profoundness, or even danger. Although the famous Yellow Crane Tower stands right near that spot, strangely, Lou does not show the tower but trains the camera on Yu, who is dressed in a yellow windbreaker (see Figure 4). In an interview, Lou indicated that Yu is not worldly or calculating but has a transcendental touch.⁷³ Does Lou imagine her to be like one of the immortals flying with a majestic yellow crane, as the legend of the tower goes? Such an association of Yu, and Li as well, with legendary immortals would be in the spirit of Lou's suggestion of transcendence.

The two women also resemble each other in their desire for death. Yu expresses her desire to die through her voice-over. Her longing for death is also indicated early in the film when she walks on the edge of a roof. The shot of Li dead on the pavement reprises the shot of Yu lying on the cement

⁷³ Cui, 101, 108.

bottom of the pool. Later, in Wuhan, Yu has a bicycle accident and is again seen lying on the ground. Precisely in this moment of “dying,” the name Zhou Wei, which she was forgetting, occurs to her. But she does not die, just as she did not die in 1989. Lying on the ground, ringed by concerned bystanders, Yu’s posture foreshadows Li Ti’s posture in death in Berlin, where she, too, is surrounded by onlookers. In this way, Lou plays with doubling scenes as well as characters.

The Tiananmen massacre marked the end of idealism, and *Summer Palace* implies that death is not only physical but also spiritual. Toward the end of the film, screen text indicates that “Li Ti was buried in 1998 in the cemetery at Wiesenburger Weg in Marzahn, Berlin. Carved on her tombstone is the following anonymous inscription: Whether there is freedom and love or not, in death everyone is equal. I hope that death is not your end. You adored the light, so you will never fear the darkness.” Li’s suicide is fictitious, as is the tombstone, so these words of remembrance can therefore be read as a covert memorial for all who died in 1989 pursuing “freedom and love.” Due to political circumstances in China, the film uses Li’s death in Berlin as an opportunity to commemorate the dead of 1989, constructing an alternative site of mourning in Berlin for the victims in Beijing. Lou said, “What was most important to me was to show the evolution of Yu Hong’s character. If she had died during the events, that would have been simpler. But most of the students weren’t killed, so the story had to continue. That’s something I thought a lot about. In the film, we didn’t show a single death during the events. Death came later. That’s what I wanted to get across.”⁷⁴ Lou made clear that Li’s physical death in Berlin is a belated enactment of the deaths in Beijing where the spirit of the generation was destroyed.

The last episode in Berlin adopts a *cinéma vérité* style that includes fleeting shots of famous sights of the cityscape: Alexanderplatz, the Berlin Wall, the East Side Gallery, and the Haus am Checkpoint Charlie. As if to take a last look at the city before he heads home, Zhou walks along a wall covered with graffiti to Alexanderplatz, a favorite hangout for youngsters. Here the film creates a musical bridge between China and Germany to show how Zhou in Berlin and Yu in Wuhan miss each other. At Alexanderplatz, two old men, apparently of Eastern European origin, play on their accordions the Georgian folk song “Suliko,” which is about looking for a sweetheart’s grave and longing for the lost beloved. The scene cuts to Wuhan, where another accordionist plays as Yu’s friends bid farewell to her before she departs for Chongqing by singing “Suliko” in Chinese. Then the original Georgian version of the song is heard on the soundtrack. The film’s use of “Suliko” is a way of linking Germany, Eastern Europe, and China culturally and echoes an earlier moment when Ruo makes a quip about how East Germans claim the Chinese should have an intuitive understanding of the Berlin Wall because they built their own Great Wall.

Chongqing, where Zhou and Yu briefly reunite, embodies China’s focus on economic development after Tiananmen.⁷⁵ It is the most recent Chi-

74 Levy, “Summer Palace.”

75 Lou originally set the reunion in Shenzhen before settling on Chongqing. See Levy.

nese megacity to be designated a direct-controlled municipality (making it equivalent to a province), following Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai. The city epitomizes the riotous blooming of economic activity and urban development that invigorated China after 1989. Chongqing also exemplifies the official narrative that the government used and uses to justify its actions in 1989, claiming that it acted to guarantee political stability and economic development in China. The trajectory of Yu Hong's itinerary moves from the political center in the north to the economic center in the south, and as Lou said, "Economically speaking, of course, but [also] generally, the south is freer than the north. Especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the further from Beijing you went, the more freedom you had."⁷⁶ However, the film implicitly critiques the state of a nation that foolhardily pursues economic progress without considering the social costs it exacts on its people. Traveling from north to south, Yu does not find increased freedom but an unhappy marriage and a dead-end job. Her southbound movement does not deliver the hoped-for freedom. Instead, the story defies a happy resolution as her reunion with Zhou becomes a final goodbye. The doubly tragic ending of Yu and Li symbolizes the scar June Fourth has left on a generation of students and on the nation. The second half of *Summer Palace* thus offers a downbeat analysis of the post-Tiananmen national identity as economically driven, spiritually drained, and psychologically lost.

As the final whereabouts of major characters are revealed via screen text, *Summer Palace* flashes back to the scene in the bar where they first danced together (to the American song "Seven Little Girls Sitting in the Backseat" by Paul Evans). In so doing, it pays nostalgic tribute to their youth and to the college days when they fell in love. But after the final credits begin to roll, the film replays the segment of the June Fourth sequence in which students ecstatically ride off to join the protest and then shows Li Ti walking in Berlin while encountering the May Day rally. This critical thematic denouement to the film artistically combines the two marches that Li witnessed in 1989 and on the day of her death. This ending, easily overlooked by viewers due to its occurrence during the final credits, emphasizes the centrality of that monumental event in the memory of the Tiananmen generation and draws a direct line from that event to Li's death, thus surreptitiously commemorating those who gave their lives in the summer of 1989.

LOU AND CENSORSHIP.

For decades, Lou has been an embattled independent filmmaker under the close scrutiny of China's film bureau, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT). From 1993 to 2012, only three of his seven films were screened in China.⁷⁷ He survived in the filmmaking industry by registering his projects as foreign co-productions and securing exposure through prestigious festival bookings.⁷⁸ His first feature, *Weekend Lovers*,

⁷⁶ Levy.

⁷⁷ Berra, "Lou Ye," 79.

⁷⁸ Berra, 79; and Nikki J. Y. Lee and Julian Stringer, "Ports of Entry: Mapping Chinese Cinema's Multiple Trajectories at International Film Festivals," in *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 239–261.

addresses love and violence among Shanghai youth and was shot in 1993, but the film bureau initially prevented it from being screened abroad because of its excessively gloomy image of urban youth in China. It was not released in China for two years and then won the Rainer Werner Fassbinder Award for Best Director at the 1996 Mannheim-Heidelberg International Film Festival in Germany.⁷⁹ His second, critically acclaimed feature, *Suzhou River*, a German-Chinese co-production, was screened at film festivals in Rotterdam and Japan without securing the approval of authorities in Beijing, therefore the film was completely banned in China despite receiving critical acclaim abroad.⁸⁰

Lou hoped to premiere *Summer Palace* during the 2006 Cannes Film Festival, which was scheduled to open on May 17. The film was submitted to SARFT for review on May 16, but officials refused to complete the review for technical reasons; they complained that the film's image and sound lacked clarity and did not meet the technical standards required for a film that would represent China before the world. This accusation was a feeble pretense intended to conceal the actual reasons why the authorities would not support the film. Although the filmmakers had anticipated that *Summer Palace* would provoke political opposition, they nevertheless hoped to secure approval for the film. Producer Nai An addressed the latent reasons for SARFT's rejection of the film, arguing that although the film touched on a sensitive moment, its concerns were much broader: it covered a period of twenty years, it considered people's fate in history, and it was primarily a love story. Lou was willing to cut any part of the film to ensure a public release in China. A hastily edited print of the film was sent to SARFT for review the next day, to no avail. The film would not pass muster in time for Cannes. Because Lou held himself accountable to his actors, producers, and sponsors, however, he independently brought the film to Cannes, taking a great personal risk.⁸¹

That year, *Summer Palace* was the only Asian entry to compete for the Golden Palm at Cannes. Despite the pressure the Chinese government exerted on Cannes organizers to exclude the film from the festival, the screening was not canceled. At first, Chinese media outlets reported the Cannes festival in routine fashion, rooting for the Chinese contender. But the day after the screening of *Summer Palace*, news of Cannes disappeared from Chinese media within seconds. The government recalled Chinese reporters from Cannes and forbade coverage of the festival itself. Internet searches for

79 Berra, "Lou Ye," 80; and Sun, "All Artists Are Narcissistic," 237.

80 Sun, "All Artists Are Narcissistic," 244; and Jonathan Landreth, "Behind the Red Curtain: Helmer Risks Much for His Craft," *Hollywood Reporter*, Vol. 395 (July 18–24, 2006): 14.

81 "Kangcheng ruwei neidi fengsha, jin liusi dianying Yiheyuan" (Shortlisted at Cannes, banned in mainland China. June Fourth Film *Summer Palace* Banned), *Apple Daily*, <https://hk.appledaily.com/international/20060519/DAJOHVVCNEABXC7TXIRK-GWET4/>; Jonathan Landreth, "Will 'Palace' Make It to Palais?" *Hollywood Reporter*, Vol. 394 (April 24, 2006): 5, 14; Winnie Chung and Jonathan Landreth, "'Palace' in China's Doghouse," *Hollywood Reporter*, Vol. 394 (May 17, 2006): 7, 9; Shangguan Ningning, "Jiana dianying jie 18 ri kaimu, yiheyuan bei ju shen" (Cannes Film Festival Opens on 18th, *Summer Palace* Was Denied Review), *Sina*, May 18, 2006, <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2006-05-17/02568943085s.shtml>; and Chris Chang, "Distributor Wanted: Summer Palace," *Film Comment*, January/February 2007, 6.

Cannes, Lou Ye, or *Summer Palace* yielded no hits on Chinese websites. Shortly before the awards ceremony, however, live reporting from Cannes suddenly resumed in China; once the Chinese government had confirmed that *Summer Palace* would not receive a prize, it ended the media blackout. Nevertheless, reporters were still prohibited from mentioning the film, and even today the Chinese equivalent of Wikipedia does not list *Summer Palace* as one of the entries at the 2006 Cannes festival. That September, SARFT quietly banned Lou Ye and Nai An from filmmaking for five years. *Summer Palace* was never publicly released in China, but Chinese viewers watched pirated copies clandestinely, and the film is reputedly a must-see for college students. The coming-of-age story of the 1989 generation has become part of later generations' coming-of-age experience.⁸²

After he was placed under a five-year ban, Lou managed to circumvent censors by recruiting outside investors and surreptitiously shot a gay drama in Nanjing, *Chun Feng Chen Zui De Ye Wan* (*Spring Fever*, 2009), which was registered as a French–Hong Kong co-production. He later directed *Love and Bruises* (2011), set mostly in Paris, for which he received largely French funding.⁸³ Lou is a leading figure in French-Chinese arthouse co-productions and has regularly received grants and production funding from the National Center for Cinema and the Moving Image in France, which supports independent filmmakers in China.⁸⁴ But veteran and internationally acclaimed Chinese filmmakers still face perennial censorship if they touch on sensitive topics. Just recently, Zhang Yimou's *Yi Miao Zhong* (*One Second*, 2020), which addresses the Cultural Revolution, was pulled from the 2019 Berlinale film festival as a contender for the Golden Bear “due to technical difficulties encountered during postproduction.”⁸⁵ That same year, Lou Ye's *Feng Zhong You Duo Yu Zuo De Yun* (*The Shadow Play*, 2018), about corruption in the real estate and construction business in China, was shown in the Berlinale's Panorama section. Lou said in interviews that getting permission to screen the film at the Berlinale was the longest and most complicated negotiation process he has experienced in his career.⁸⁶

Considering these examples of more recent censorship, a film about the bloodily suppressed student protest at Tiananmen Square would have had no chance of being seen had Lou not taken the personal risk of screening it at Cannes. Sylvain Bursztejn, the French co-producer of *Summer Palace*, reacted strongly to the ban. For Bursztejn, it was incomprehensible that filmmakers and artists in China should be deprived of the freedom to use the student

82 Etan Vlessing, “Lou Says He'll Work around Ban,” *Hollywood Reporter*, Vol. 396 (September 15–17, 2006): 2, 34.

83 Berra, “Lou Ye,” 81; and Dan Kois, “Needs More Fever,” *Village Voice*, August 4–10, 2010, 46.

84 Xin Zhou, “Interview: Lou Ye,” *Film Comment*, June 30, 2014, <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-lou-ye/>.

85 Amy Qin, “Film Set in China's Cultural Revolution Is Pulled from Berlin Festival,” *New York Times*, February 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/13/world/asia/zhang-yimou-berlin-film-festival.html>

86 Patrick Frater, “Banned in Berlin: Why China Said No Go to Zhang Yimou,” *Variety*, February 11, 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/film/asia/banned-in-berlin-why-china-no-go-zhang-yimou-1203135788/>.

movement as the background for a love story.⁸⁷ But the Chinese government relentlessly enforces public silence about the Tiananmen crackdown. Bursz-tejn also argued that the full potential of Chinese cinema cannot be realized unless censorship is alleviated. Nai An, who produced *Summer Palace*, pointed out how artistic creativity is suppressed in China due to censorship as well as self-censorship. Accepting the risk that the film would be censored, Lou's team made *Summer Palace* according to their conscience and with a patriotic idealism reminiscent of the 1989 protests. Before Lou, a few Chinese writers, filmmakers, and artists had only indirectly or vaguely touched upon June Fourth.⁸⁸ Nai An hoped the film would affect the Chinese government's stance on the censorship of anything related to June Fourth and on censorship in general: "I don't know how significant *Summer Palace* will become, but I believe it has its place in transgressing the censorship limitations in Chinese cinema." Lou Ye believed the film is "a piece of documented historical truth" and would in some way aid in combating China's collective amnesia regarding 1989.⁸⁹

Every Chinese filmmaker or artist is aware of the potential consequences of depicting the Tiananmen crisis, and it is commendable that *Summer Palace* did not blot out the memory of that summer. Indeed, it would be unconscionable for filmmakers of the 1989 generation to skip over that season in a film that pays tribute to their youth. The very structure of the film insists on the centrality of Tiananmen for that generation by placing its depiction of the student protests at the center of the film. The ban of the film proved that in 2006, the Chinese government was no closer to rehabilitating the student movement. Despite the ban, however, *Summer Palace* became a cult film among college students and young intellectuals in China. This may offer some comfort to its filmmakers.

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87 Mertene, "Making of the Film."

88 Berry, "Beijing 1989," 298–364.

89 Mertene, "Making of the Film."